

# A Journey Down Surplus Street: The Half-House

PART VII

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

This week in our series we continue to explore the architecture of the Cape Cod by visiting one of Duxbury's last remaining half houses.

**SURPLUS ST** Such houses are rare to find since most owners expanded them into full Cape Cods to address their needs for additional space. Now as we journey down Surplus Street, we come to a beautiful example of a half Cape - The John Pierce House. I consider this pristine white Cape a gem not only as a testimony of this almost extinct architectural style, but also for its ties to the railroad system, the Delano family, and



Duxbury's last living World War I veteran, who cherished her half Cape on Surplus Street. A pathway can cross over more than just brooks and railroad track. It can span centuries of local history and lore, which once revealed can leave a lasting impression on both researcher and reader.

continued on page 19

## A Journey Down Surplus Street: The Half House

continued from page one

### The John Pierce House 205 Surplus Street

There is some speculation surrounding why half houses were built in the early days. Some researchers believe half houses were often built for unmarried daughters as dowry cottages. It was one way to appeal to a potential suitor who would get not only a wife but also a house in the process. "But, if the girl were unlucky in romance, she might continue to live in her half house in modest independence," noted author Doris Doane.

Still others believe half houses were popular with newly married couples who could afford to purchase land, and build only a modest house. The half house provided an architectural style that was easy to add on to in the future, expanding the house into a full Cape without destroying its roof lines and current spaces.

A half house is built with two windows to the side of the front door. As with three-quarter and full Capes, the half house also maintained a large chimney, which was located opposite the front doorway, and rose through the ridge of the roof.

Half houses which never became full Capes were sometimes called "sad houses" because its owners either had no children to require a second half or no money to build a second half, said former Town Historian Dorothy Wentworth. In the case of the John Pierce house, it appears the first reason is why

it never became a full Cape; only one family in all the owners of this house had a child grow up here. "I know of no other house in Duxbury with that sad distinction," said Wentworth.

The story of this half house begins in 1834 when John Pierce purchased a small parcel of improved land from John Delano who owned a large tract of farmland on Surplus Street. Improved land is a description used in deeds to describe cleared land, which had been previously used, such as a pasture. Pierce's small lot abutted the expansive lands of John Delano's farm on one side and the other bordered the road now known as Surplus Street.

Pierce was a yeoman, or farmer as we call them today, who was already married and had a two-year old daughter, Elizabeth, when he purchased the land. His wife, Deborah, gave birth the following year to Leander; however, the couple had sold their new house only twenty days before his birth. It is unknown why or where the Pierce family moved to, but they left behind a quaint half Cape.

The layout of the half house includes a keeping room, burning room and front parlor, and sometimes a buttery. When John Pierce built his house, he kept to the typical layout. On the first floor, there was a front parlor, a keeping room (kitchen) which was located at the back end of the house, and a first floor bedroom, known as the burning room.

Typically, a half house was

a one story structure, however in the Pierce house there was a fireplace on the second floor which might indicate this area was finished off for sleeping quarters. "Very often several generations of children slept on



World War I army nurse Gladys Reynolds Dwyer in 1918.

Photo courtesy of Eleanor Prince

pallets in an unfinished area under the eaves, the low rafters and warm chimney bricks making it comfortable until the night winds crept in to chill it," said Wentworth.

The stairwell is located directly opposite the front door and has the usual pitch found in such houses. It arrives at a landing before a step into the upstairs bedroom. It appears there may have been at one time "Good Morning Stairs," which led to two sleeping quarters, one opposite the other off the stairwell landing. "These stairs were aptly called 'Good Morning Stairs,' for when the occupants of the bedrooms arose each day they faced each other and could say 'Good morning' before descending to the first floor," noted Doane.

Along with his sturdy small house, John Pierce also sold additional buildings. In the deed transfer, he describes the property as a "homestead farm." It is difficult to imagine his piece of land, only 1/5 of an acre, capable of containing a house, barn, and pasture, and all the more puzzling that Pierce received \$500 for his property. While this amount seems like a pittance today, such a selling price would have been considered very high for any property during 1835. "A large cape cottage built near the shore at the same time cost under \$600, which leaves one wondering how this half house on a side lane brought such a price," noted Wentworth. "It is

perhaps a statement of the fine workmanship and condition of the property.

The man who purchased the property for such a substantial amount was Marston Sampson. Interestingly, he was not married when he bought the half house. Single men typically purchased a house in conjunction with an imminent marriage; however, there was no known pending nuptial in the case of Marston Sampson. In fact, Sampson only owned the house for 3 1/2 years, selling it for \$650 in 1839, a year and half before his marriage to Lucy Simmons of Duxbury.

It is possible Sampson only purchased the property as an investment. From a later deed he



Lieutenant Frank Dwyer, 104<sup>th</sup> Infantry from Mass. World War I photos taken in 1918.

Photo courtesy of Eleanor Prince

is described as a "gentleman" rather than the yeoman, which he was listed as in 1835. Sampson apparently became a successful businessman, purchasing other property and adding to his wealth.

A mariner named Aaron Chandler purchased the half Cape from Sampson for his wife Abigail Weston and their six-month old son Jesse, most likely to reside in while he was away for long stretches of time at sea. It is unknown exactly how long the Chandler family resided in the Cape. Tax documents reveal an Alden Delano, who was a shoemaker, paying poll and personal taxes in this district, and two years before purchasing the house, he was paying the real estate tax on it. This information along with the fact that Aaron Chandler disappears from the poll tax list but continues to pay real estate tax, makes the researcher believe

that Alden Delano and his family rented the half Cape on Surplus Street for many years.

When Alden Delano purchased the house in November of 1866, he paid only \$400 for it, which could reflect the general depression after the Civil War. The transaction also marked the return of the property back to the original Delano family who had once owned the land. Alden Delano was a cousin of John Delano.

It was Alden Delano's son, George, who would be the only child to grow up in the house. The Delanos had been raising George, who was adopted from Abington, for many years in the house.

His father, Alden Delano, spent the remainder of his life at this half house, which he left to his son George when he died in 1892. His mother continued to live in the house with her son until her death sometime before 1898.

George Delano was the first owner to be connected to the railroad, then called the Duxbury and Cohasset Rail Road. Its tracks passed on the west border of his property, so close to the house that the windows must have rattled as the train slowed down for the Surplus Street crossing.

The Duxbury and Cohasset Railroad was completed in 1871, and took 8 months to build, "but the roadbed sagged so badly in swampy areas that passengers had to disembark and then reboard further on, where the ground was firmer," noted Joan Schlueter in the *Duxbury Book*.

The railroad system continued in Duxbury until 1939. It had been a major factor in rejuvenating the local economy as it brought the summer people to the town. Businesses catering to the summer residents and vacationers flourished, along with property values. In addition, the railroad provided employment, creating new jobs for the local people, including George Delano.

George became a flagman for the Surplus Street crossing. "There was a small crossing tender's house across the street but he could hardly have needed it so close was his own home," said Wentworth. He was kept fairly busy with more than 12 trains passing a day through the Surplus Street crossing.

"Romance came late to George Alden Delano and it came down the very tracks that carried the trains he flagged," noted Wentworth. Annie Brown was a housekeeper for one of the summer residents, Mrs. Jane Anderson, who purchased the Bradford House on Harrison Street in 1894. Brown was an Irish immigrant origi-

... continued on next page.



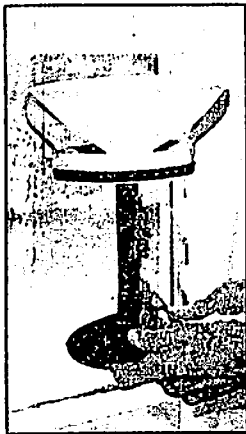
Eleanor Prince holding up her Aunt Gladys' black lace dress she wore to American Legion dances.

Photo by Deborah Kutz

## A Journey Down Surplus Street: The Half House

continued from previous page

nally from Londonerry in North Ireland. "There was little for a girl to do in Duxbury after the day's work was over, so Annie walked the tracks into a new life," added Wentworth.



Dwyer's nursing cap.

Photo by Debora Katz

Annie, however, was hardly a girl when she met George Delano. She was 31 years old and he was 45 years. Their "courtship" continued each summer until 1905 when the Anderson family sold their house in Duxbury and relocated to upper state New York. Perhaps this event was the catalyst for Delano to make his move, for the bachelor now 56 years old, asked the lovely Annie for her hand in marriage, and she, now 46 years old, accepted and moved into the half Cape.

It had been many years since the house had a woman's touch, and so it is not surprising that Annie Brown Delano proceeded to update the Cape Cod. This marked the first major changes to the house since John Pierce had built it in 1834. Annie had a new elf kitchen added to the rear of the house where she added a soapstone sink and pump, and new stove, uncommon in modest homes. The first several owners had relied on the fireplace brick oven for cooking and had to carry their water supply from a well out in the yard.

For the next six years the newlyweds lived in the Surplus Street half-house. Then in February 1912, George passed away, leaving Annie the sole inheritor of the property, now appraised at \$1030.

Annie Delano continued living in the John Pierce half house, "aided by an exemption in taxes that greatly reduced her expenses." She soon took on a boarder to provide needed income and to help with the maintenance of the property. George W. Cobbett became Annie Delano's first and last boarder - so satisfactory an arrangement that in 1916 they married.

Cobbett owned a lot across the street from the John Pierce

house where he kept a stable and two horses. In 1920 he purchased from the Old Colony Rail Company a large lot which had been part of John Delano's land, as well as a wood lot off West Street in 1927. "I remember George Cobbett running a trash disposal business in town," remarked Eleanor Prince, the current owner.

Cobbett would be the second person to make additions to the John Pierce property. In 1922, he added a two-car garage and shop, including a finished room in the rear with a cellar. "This very comfortable room is hard to account for until one learns about Mr. Cobbett himself," explained Wentworth. The large white plaster walled room served the needs of Cobbett and his many "jovial" buddies. "There he entertained with hard cider and a friendly game."

Once again, Annie outlived her husband who passed on in 1943, leaving her with a substantial amount of property in addition to her house. She was now 80 years old, and not as able to maintain the half-house. She decided to sell it to Gladys Reynolds Dwyer, a woman she had known as a child in the Surplus Street neighborhood. "Annie fell in love with Aunt Gladys, who could charm anyone," noted Prince, the niece of Gladys Dwyer.

Ironically, this sale to Gladys Reynolds Dwyer in 1945 also marked the return of the property to a direct descendant of John Delano who had originally sold the land to John Pierce for him to build his half-house. Gladys was not a stranger to Surplus Street. She had grown up only a short distance away from the John Pierce house on her family's homestead, the Delano/Reynolds' farm.

Gladys Reynolds Dwyer was born January 5, 1895 in the barning room of her family's farmhouse. She was Harvey and Cora (Delano) Reynolds' 3rd child of their 13 children. Gladys was a special girl who always knew she wanted to become a nurse. She attended Partridge Academy in Duxbury and then graduated from St. Vincent School of Nursing in Worcester in 1917. "She was determined to show Duxbury that she could amount to something, since she had been teased so much growing up because she had such a large family," noted Prince.

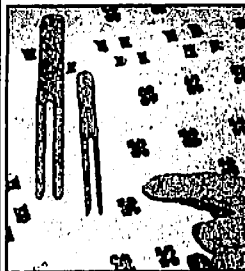
Gladys Reynolds Dwyer did show Duxbury her strength and courage. In November of 1917, she signed up with the army along with her nursing friends without informing her family. On Christmas Eve of 1917, she received the official telegram assigning her to the Walter Reed General Hospital in

Washington. Gladys was a bit disappointed since she had originally signed on for overseas duty, but she eventually got her wish in February of 1918 as she boarded the troop ship to Europe with 17 other nurses. "There was no turning back then. I don't think anyone would have, though. We just prayed we'd have the courage," said Gladys in an interview with Judith Montminy for the *Duxbury Clipper* in 1985.

Her trip to Liverpool took 14 days. "There were two ships going over, and they were told that if one got torpedoed or sank, they were not to stop to save the other ship but to continue on. Luckily they made it," recalled Prince. Gladys became so seasick on her way to the frontlines she didn't have time to worry about what she would soon face, added Prince.

After Gladys' initial training in Liverpool, she was sent to France where she served close to the front lines. "The nurses' barracks were freezing cold, with the only heat source coming from a small potbelly wood stove. "Gladys and the other nurses would walk the railroad tracks and pick up coal to heat their barracks," noted Prince.

They also named the rats that lived in the barracks after



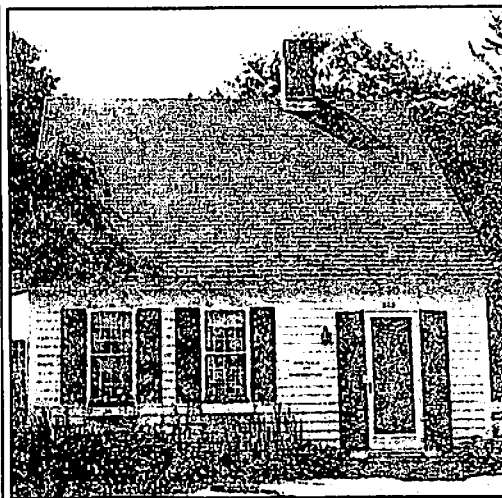
Hand-carved clothespins found in the walls during a renovation.

Photo by Debora Katz

their officers. One day Gladys forgot to take her nursing cap with her, when she returned to her barracks, she found it full of holes - the rats had eaten through it. "Aunt Gladys saved that cap as a reminder of her stay," noted Prince. These women, whose sole job was to help the soldiers return to the front lines as soon as possible, remained friends for many years after the war.

Gladys never spoke of the atrocities she witnessed during the war. "I don't want to talk about the gruesome things. You try to forget them, but of course you never can. There's been too many wars since then...old men make wars," she said to Montminy.

There were some happy moments for Gladys during the war. She took her first airplane flight with Eddie Rickenbacker, one of the top flying aces of World War I. "He was showing off for her, doing loops and loops when she got sick all over



One of Duxbury's few remaining half house - John Pierce House

Photo by Debora Katz

the inside of his plane," laughed Prince.

Gladys' also met the love of her life, Frank Dwyer, during the war. He was the 2nd Lieutenant of the 104th Infantry from Massachusetts, and was wounded during fighting on the front lines in France. She nursed him back, and the two fell in love. "They had to keep their courtship quiet because it was against the rules for officers to date nurses," noted Prince.

The couple returned from the war to live in New York, where Gladys worked as a private nurse for the next thirty-two years. They decided to retire in Duxbury in the half house on Surplus Street. Gladys would modernize the house, while keeping all the original rooms in tact. She would add a new kitchen ell in the rear, transforming the one Annie had added in 1905 into a family room. Gladys also added fine details to the house, such as a built in china cabinet.

In 1963, Frank Dwyer passed away, leaving Gladys' the sole owner and occupant of the house. The couple never had children of their own, but with such a large extended family there were many nieces and nephews to keep her company. Eleanor Prince often visited her Aunt Gladys, who was so fond of her niece. During a recent visit to the John Pierce House, Eleanor pointed out a child's wooden chair belonging to her mother, Ella. Sitting in it is a very old Patsy Doll with evidence of a young girl's use, but still very much in tact. "My Aunt Gladys sent that doll to me when I was seven...the mailman actually hand delivered it to me on Christmas Day...you can imagine what that doll meant to me," remarked Prince.

Gladys Reynolds Dwyer was known in Duxbury for her role at the American Legion

Post 223, where she held the office of assistant chaplain. "She participated in all the Post services and activities...she loved the social gatherings, no matter what the cause," noted one Legion member.

In 1988, Gladys was honored by the Republic of France for her service in World War I. Her name was on the Duxbury Roll of Honor published by the Liberty Loan Committee - there were 69 men listed and one Army nurse, Gladys Reynolds Dwyer.

On April 2, 1992, Duxbury's last living World War I veteran, Gladys Reynolds Dwyer, passed away at the age of 97 years old. She left the John Pierce house to her niece Eleanor Prince. "It's not my house, I call it Aunt Gladys' and my house, I'm the care taker," noted Prince.

Since then, Eleanor Prince has maintained the house with such care and devotion. Framed old photos of the Delano/Reynolds family adorn the walls, and Aunt Gladys' hats are on display in several rooms, along with her nursing cap which rests on a silver hat stand on a family dresser. From another room, Eleanor brings out a beautiful detailed black lace dress her Aunt Gladys wore to every American Legion dance. Two hand-carved clothes pins found in the walls during renovations are also on display as a reminder of the Cape's earlier days. Eleanor Prince is no longer just the caretaker of Aunt Gladys' Cape and Duxbury's few remaining half houses, she has become the curator of its many treasures.

Next week in this series, we will explore the history behind the Delano Farm and early farming in New England as we journey down one of Duxbury's oldest pathways.